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HUMANITARIANISM AS A WEAPONS SYSTEM

David Luban*

ABSTRACT

One important theme in Rosa Brooks's *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything* is that in Iraq and Afghanistan the United States has increasingly given the military reconstruction tasks that seem more like civilian jobs. This is part of the pivot to a "hearts-and-minds" counter-insurgency strategy; but in larger part it reflects our great trust in our military and diminishing trust in civilian government. The result is a vicious circle: As resources shift from civilian agencies to the military doing similar jobs, the civilian agencies become less effective, which seems to vindicate the judgment that the military can do it better. In this reflection, I suggest that alongside the vicious circle that concerns Brooks, another problem with using the military for civilian tasks is that the moment strategy changes away from "hearts and minds," the military will abandon the civilian jobs. Thus, the moral character of the work is different. I use Phil Klay's reality-based short story "Money as a Weapons System" and the career of T. E. Lawrence to illustrate the point.

* * *

One of Professor Rosa Brooks's main insights concerns the way that "the military became everything."¹ The military became everything in the sense that humanitarian, nation-building, and governance responsibilities that are "ordinarily" done by civilians become military tasks once we are engaged in Forever Wars, as we now seem to be. Counterinsurgency (COIN)—a hearts and minds strategy—requires that our military now work closely with locals on governance projects.² Do the locals need a middle school or a women's health clinic? Then providing them a middle school or a women's health clinic, and helping to manage and staff it, becomes a military task. The COIN of the realm becomes the coin of the realm.

Conversely, the coin of the realm becomes the COIN of the realm. Consider Phil Klay's hilarious short fiction story about Iraqi reconstruction, "Money as a

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1. ROSA BROOKS, *HOW EVERYTHING BECAME WAR AND THE MILITARY BECAME EVERYTHING: TALES FROM THE PENTAGON* 22 (2016).

2. See *id.* at 92–94 (describing the emergence of the counterinsurgency doctrine).

Weapons System,” in *Redeployment*.³ (Spoiler alert: plot revelations coming.) As with Brooks’s book, the title says it: The way Washington wins hearts and minds is by routing billions of dollars through the Pentagon into whatever civil reconstruction projects mesh with the reigning ideology of the American administration—which, in Klay’s story, means economic development along the free market principles cherished by the George W. Bush administration.⁴

In *Redeployment*, the first-person narrator, Nathan, is a civilian member of an embedded Provincial Reconstruction Team in Iraq, partnering with a brigade combat team. (In the inevitable acronyms: Nathan’s ePRT is part of a BCT.) “I remember Condoleezza Rice declaring that civil administration and police functions had no part in a military campaign. ‘We don’t need to have the 82nd Airborne,’ she said, ‘escorting kids to kindergarten.’ In 2008, around the time I got there, the 82nd Airborne was building greenhouses near Tikrit.”⁵

What Nathan really wants to do is get a non-functioning water treatment plant the United States military built a few years earlier up and running. But the plant was built with the wrong size water pipes, and the Shi’ite-controlled Iraqi ministry does not want water to go to Sunnis. However, the project gets a green light once the ministry learns that the high-pressure water pipes will actually blow up all the local Sunnis’ toilets simultaneously. Meanwhile, Cindy, a civilian in charge of women’s empowerment, tells Nathan that what would really make a difference is keeping the successful women’s health clinic open. But women’s health is not economic development, so it falls outside the line of effort (LOE). Instead, how about teaching beekeeping to five Iraqi widows? That would check multiple boxes in the LOE to-do list. Meanwhile, Nathan has to do photo-ops of local children playing baseball, because a politically connected philanthropist, the “mattress king of northern Kansas” who “thinks baseball is just the thing for Iraqis,” has donated the uniforms and equipment.⁶ And so it goes.

The main military character in the story is Major Jacob Zima, who runs the brigade’s Civil Affairs Company, and who “projected an idiocy so pure it boggled the mind.”⁷ Talking to Zima is “like confessing your sins to Daffy Duck.”⁸ Or so Nathan thinks at first. In fact, Zima is the only one around who actually knows how to navigate the bureaucracy. When Nathan sends an impolitic e-mail to the Mattress King and calls down the wrath of a congressman on the brigade, an enraged lieutenant colonel sends a brusque order: “I want this unfucked. Now.”⁹ Zima is the one who knows how to “unfuck” it. “Hey, Nathan, . . . maybe you

3. PHIL KLAY, *Money as a Weapons System*, in REDEPLOYMENT 77 (2014).

4. For a parallel non-fiction account that is equally absurdist, see RAJIV CHANDRASEKARAN, *IMPERIAL LIFE IN THE EMERALD CITY: INSIDE IRAQ’S GREEN ZONE* (2006).

5. KLAY, *supra* note 3, at 77. For the Rice quotation, *see also* Michael R. Gordon, *Bush Would Stop U.S. Peacekeeping in Balkan Fights: Europe to Bear Burden; A Plan for the Most Important Shift in NATO Duties Since the End of the Cold War*, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 21, 2000, at A1. Ms. Rice was talking about the U.S. role in Balkan peacekeeping.

6. KLAY, *supra* note 3, at 92–94.

7. *Id.* at 92.

8. *Id.* at 112.

9. *Id.* at 101–02.

should let me handle this guy. No need to kick the hornets' nest."¹⁰ Zima knows how to get the water treatment plant approved without blowing up the Sunnis' toilets; it is Zima who repackages the women's health clinic as a business-development necessity and gets the funds flowing. Zima understands that "it's hard to come in and change people's culture," but he soldiers on anyway.¹¹ Zima knows the difference between mere bureaucratic absurdity and the genuine madness he witnessed two years earlier.¹²

Klay's story is a cynical Hellenesque farce, but it has subtle points about how, in fact, the military is everything. Nathan and Cindy are earnest and intelligent, and they want to make a difference. But they are out of their league. Zima seems to be doing nothing but serving time—but his unimpressive surface conceals shrewd realism, and he gets things done.

The question worth pondering is whether there is anything wrong with the military becoming everything. As long as the greenhouses get built, the middle school classes get taught, the water plant finally opens, and the toilets don't explode, who cares if it's the military that is doing it? The subtext in Klay's portrait of Major Zima is that the military may well do it better than the overt do-gooders.

Indeed, the U.S. military prides itself on its can-do ethos, and that carries over to military operations other than war. On a wallet card carried by U.S. soldiers, under the heading "Boots on the Ground," is the "Warrior Ethos:" "I will always place the mission first. I will never accept defeat. I will never quit."¹³ That is a pretty attractive attitude in anyone, and it is doubly attractive when the mission is civilian reconstruction. (I know a now-retired U.S. Army major who was involved in civilian reconstruction in Bosnia in the early 2000s. He was so good at his job that his village asked him to stay on as their warlord. He declined their offer.) Why not let the military do it all, in that case?

Brooks warns about one dangerous dynamic: As civilian tasks are transferred to the Pentagon, along with the money to carry them out, the civilian agencies will lose their mission, their prestige, and their budgets.¹⁴ As a result, they will lose their capability. "The money should go to the Army because the Army can do it better" then becomes a self-licking ice cream cone. In the early months of the Trump administration, we could see the Pentagon gaining importance as the State Department languished with crucial jobs unfilled and a budget that was melting away. For that matter, as the military takes over tasks that were previously run by NGOs, the NGOs risk being crowded out of the field—or, for that matter, suspected in the countries where they work of being covert U.S. operatives.

The military sucking the oxygen out of civilian institutions is a real problem.

10. *Id.* at 103.

11. *Id.* at 109.

12. KLAY, *supra* note 3, at 112.

13. *See Warrior Ethos*, U.S. ARMY, <https://www.army.mil/values/warrior.html> (last visited Feb. 15, 2018).

14. BROOKS, *supra* note 1, at 322.

However, some might counter that it's only a real problem if you think the military won't do as good or better a job than the civilian agencies and the NGOs—and, once again, there is no reason to assume that.

My concern is with a different dangerous dynamic. The military operates under a fundamentally different set of ethical imperatives from civilian agencies and NGOs. The fundamental ethical imperative of the military is winning.¹⁵ Of course, it is crucial that the military win cleanly, without violating international humanitarian law (IHL). But IHL is not the issue when the military task is staffing a middle school.

The issue is that all of the Army's good works are instrumentalized.¹⁶ Under COIN, civilian reconstruction is a strategy for winning, nothing more. For that matter, to read the COIN manual is to learn that even fighting cleanly is packaged as a way to gain military advantage.

Well, what's wrong with instrumentalizing good works? Two things, it seems to me:

First, the moment the strategy changes, the good works will screech to a halt, leaving the half-finished projects to implode. Suppose the Army recruits school teachers because it has a manpower need for school teachers in the Afghani area of operation and puts them to work in middle schools. (Alternatively, it might decide to farm out the work to contractors, the "coalition of the billing,"¹⁷ but I will leave that to one side.) Those teachers will pack up and leave the moment they are ordered to. And all those hearts-and-minds operations, which are humane and perhaps effective, will vanish when the doctrine pivots away from COIN and reverts to killing people and breaking things—the reason we have an Army in the first place.

Second, and related to the first point, is that when the Army pivots away from the humane mission, this is a form of betrayal. Brooks quotes from a FORSCOM (United States Army Forces Command) handout for training our Regionally Aligned Forces: "In the Human Domain, people-to-people relationships matter!"¹⁸ However, when the reasons for people-to-people relationships are purely strategic, it follows that they matter only contingently. From the standpoint of the civilians who trusted those people-to-people relationships, abandonment when the orders change is betrayal. From the standpoint of soldiers who built the relationships, it is a moment of bitterness (if you actually took the person-to-person relationships on board personally and psychologically), or of losing your soul (if you were too oblivious to notice the betrayal). It's a paler version of the moral netherworld of John le Carré's spy novels.

Here, perhaps the most striking non-fictional illustration of the moral injury

15. See *Warrior Ethos*, *supra* note 13 ("I will always place the mission first. I will never accept defeat.").

16. I am grateful to my U.S. Naval Academy colleague Marcus Hedahl for illuminating conversations about this issue.

17. P. W. Singer, *Outsourcing War*, FOREIGN AFFAIRS (March/April 2005), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2005-03-01/outsourcing-war>.

18. BROOKS, *supra* note 1, at 149.

instrumentalization can inflict on soldiers is T. E. Lawrence's career, as he details it in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*,¹⁹ one of the greatest of all military memoirs. Lawrence's mission was to win over the Arabs to fight against the Ottomans in World War I, and as everyone knows he fought alongside the tribesmen with lunatic courage—he “went native” as few others have ever done. As the representative of the King of England, Lawrence promised them independent states if they prevailed; he backed it with his personal word.²⁰ But it was a false promise, because in the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement, Britain and France secretly agreed to parcel out the Middle East between themselves.²¹ Lawrence recalled that when he and the other British intelligence staff in Cairo learned about Sykes-Picot, the result was “a collective urge to vomit.”²² The deceit and promise-breaking tortured Lawrence, and he refused to be decorated by the King for his valor.²³ Eventually he hid from the world: he went back into the military under a false name. Lawrence understood the moral duplicity of winning hearts and minds for purely strategic purposes that can change in a moment, and it ate away at him. Although his mission was fighting, rather than civilian reconstruction, the moral dynamic is the same.

The point is that war is politics by other means, and the military's business in war is victory. Political morality is not the same as morality. Lord Palmerston's quintessentially political maxim declares that there are no eternal allies, only eternal interests, “and those interests it is our duty to follow.”²⁴ And, in a system of civilian control, the military must go along with whatever treacheries the civilian leaders decide are in the national interest. Some person-to-person relationships!

Although such betrayals do not figure in Klay's short story, there are hints of moral injury at the moment when Nathan feels as if “Zima's mask had slipped and given me [(Nathan)] a glimpse of some incomprehensible sadness.”²⁵ The Mattisism “Be polite, be professional, but have a plan to kill everybody you meet” has swagger, but it does not sound like a recipe for building successful person-to-person relationships.²⁶ Major Zima's “incomprehensible sadness” is—Nathan continues—“the sadness you saw all around you every time you left the FOB.”²⁷ Perhaps that sadness comes when the military becomes everything, and the victory imperative of the military lies at the foundation of everything.

19. T. E. LAWRENCE, *SEVEN PILLARS OF WISDOM: A TRIUMPH* (1935).

20. *Id.* at 275–77.

21. See generally JEREMY WILSON, *LAWRENCE OF ARABIA: THE AUTHORIZED BIOGRAPHY* 195–241 (1989).

22. SCOTT ANDERSON, *LAWRENCE IN ARABIA: WAR, DECEIT, IMPERIAL FOLLY AND THE MAKING OF THE MODERN MIDDLE EAST* 163 (2013).

23. WILSON, *supra* note 21, at 577.

24. 97 Parl Deb HC (3d ser.) (1848) col. 66 (UK).

25. KLAY, *supra* note 3, at 112.

26. Madeline Conway, 9 *Unforgettable Quotes by James Mattis*, POLITICO (Dec. 1, 2016, 9:03 PM), <https://www.politico.com/blogs/donald-trump-administration/2016/12/james-mattis-quotes-232097>.

27. KLAY, *supra* note 3, at 112.

